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STATUS OF THE MERCURE SATELLITE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM AS AT 13 OCTOBER 1997

Note by the secretariat

1. The present information document, which has been prepared in response to the discussion on the subject at the first meeting of the High-level Committee (UNEP/HLC/1/5, paras. 47-51), reviews the status of implementation of the Mercure satellite telecommunications system as at 13 October 1997.

2. It will be recalled that, since its conception in 1993, the implementation of the Mercure system has been reviewed by the Governing Council on three separate occasions and subsequently endorsed in decisions 17/38 of 21 May 1993, 18/47 of 25 May 1995 and 19/30 of 7 February 1997. The system will become operational in the last quarter of 1997.

3. Responsibility for implementation and operation of Mercure was transferred to UNEP from the European Space Agency by the signing on 6 August 1997 of an agreement to that effect by the Executive Director of UNEP and the Director General of the European Space Agency. The Mercure system will be inaugurated on 5 November 1997 in Geneva, after which operational services will begin for the benefit of UNEP and its partners.

4. By the end of October 1997, physical installations in 10 of the 14 participating countries (Bahrain, Bolivia, China, Cuba, Kenya, Mozambique, Niger, Nepal, Switzerland and Thailand) will have been completed and be ready for operation. Two additional, independently funded stations, in Norway and Austria, will have also been installed and ready for operation by that time.

5. Work on the installations in Costa Rica and Kazakstan is finally under way after extended customs delays and the facilities are expected to be operational by the end of October 1997. The Hanoi installation is also targeted for completion by the end of October 1997.

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6. Delays have also been experienced with the installation of the Moscow station because of unsettled issues regarding the implementation plan, and incomplete host agency arrangements in the Russian Federation. Negotiations are continuing with government authorities to ensure an early resolution to these outstanding problems.

7. The Nairobi Mercure station had been tested and declared ready for operation by the end of July 1997, following final installation and alignment of equipment by a technical team from the donor countries. UNEP invited the Kenya Posts and Telecommunications Corporation (KPTC) to join in the final testing of the Mercure facilities at the time, but this did not prove possible. Subsequently, in collaboration with the Office of the Permanent Representative of Kenya to UNEP, the Mercure facilities were opened for inspection to a technical team from KPTC on 1 September 1997. UNEP is, however, still awaiting feedback from the inspection and final approval from the Government of Kenya for UNEP officially to operate the station in Kenya.

8. As a result of the delayed start to operations in Nairobi, there have been efficiency and cost implications for UNEP headquarters. The inauguration of the Mercure system has also been reprogrammed to take place in Geneva rather than Nairobi because of the delays in authorization.

9. A funding proposal, in line with the recommendations of Governing Council decision 19/30, was submitted to the Government of Norway in June 1997. This proposal seeks financial resources sufficient for the establishment of a centre at Arendal, Norway, to assist UNEP in the implementation and operation of UNEPnet and Mercure. On 31 July 1997, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway confirmed its willingness jointly to fund the UNEPnet programme to a total of 25.2 million Norwegian kroner (approximately US$ 3.3 million) over five years. Administrative steps, including securing UNEP matching funds as agreed in the request for funding, are being undertaken to formalize these commitments.

10. The Prime Minister of Norway officiated at the opening of the UNEPnet/Mercure facility in Arendal on 3 September 1997, where a preview of the Mercure system and UNEPnet was provided. Data and video-conferencing links were established successfully between Arendal, Beijing and Bangkok at this ceremony.

11. The question of possible integration of the Mercure system with the United Nations Global Telecommunications Network in the future is also being addressed in cooperation with United Nations Headquarters in New York. As a consequence, the United Nations Information Technology Services Division has agreed to fund an independent study by the International Telecommunication Union on the integration question and other opportunities for maximizing the benefits of Mercure to the UNEP programme. The study is to begin in the last quarter of 1997 with the results to be produced in early 1998.